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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire was developed to assess high school principals' attitudes regarding the Tennessee Proficiency Test. The questionnaires were distributed statewide to the 147 public high school principals; 121 principals responded. Questionnaire items dealt with issues such as policy statements, remedial activities, graduation requirements, and quality of education. An analysis of the data indicated that (1) most school systems do not have written school board policies regarding proficiency testing; (2) most schools have remedial instruction such as regular classroom teachers, parental involvement, programmed materials, computer assisted instruction, resource teachers, tutors, extra assignments, and extended school days; (3) most principals believe that proficiency testing will improve the quality of education; (4) instruction in subject areas not covered in tests should not diminish; (5) a certificate of attendance is recommended for those not passing the Proficiency Test; and (6) passage of the Test does not necessarily indicate the student has the "basic skills" needed. (PN)

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A STATEWIDE ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' ATTITUDES REGARDING PROFICIENCY TESTING IN TENNESSEE

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A Research Paper Presented at the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association in Nashville, Tennessee, November 18, 1983

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A STATEWIDE ASSESSMENT OF
PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' ATTITUDES
REGARDING PROFICIENCY TESTING IN TENNESSEE

Introduction

Tennessee law requires a student to pass the Tennessee Proficiency Test in order to graduate from high school with a regular diploma.[1] This is in addition to meeting any other state and local requirements for graduation. The Tennessee Proficiency Test is designed to determine a student's basic skills achievement in the areas of mathematics and language arts. Language arts includes spelling, language, and reading. The document, Rules, Regulations and Minimum Standards for Governance of Public Schools in the State of Tennessee presents the interpretation of the state board of education and legislative action regarding the Tennessee Proficiency Test. The policy states:

> "...Achieving minimum standards on all required subtests shall constitute one requirement for graduation with a regular high school diploma. The test shall first be administered to students in the ninth grade. Students who fail to meet the minimum standard on any subtest shall be given the opportunity to be retested in the following grade year. Students who have failed to meet the minimum standard on any subtest by the end of the eleventh grade, shall be given two opportunities to be retested during the twelfth grade. A student shall not be required to be retested on any subtest for which minimum standards were previously achieved." [2]

Requirements for students enrolled in the ninth grade or above before school year 1982-83:

> Students enrolled in the ninth grade or above during the 1981-82 school year and who graduate after August 31, 1982, must meet minimum standards on four subtests: sixty-five percent of the test items

> answered correctly on the mathematics subtest and seventy-five percent of the test items answered correctly on each of the three subtests of reading, language and spelling.[3]

Standards for those entering the ninth grade during the 1982-83 school year:

> Students who enter the ninth grade for the first time at the beginning of the 1982-83 school year and thereafter, must meet a minimum standard of 70% on the test items answered correctly on each of two subtests; one subtest to test proficiency in mathematics and one subtest to test proficiency in language, spelling, and reading. (Tennessee Code Annotated, 49-117).[4]

Should a student not pass both parts of the proficiency test by the end of their senior year, they will receive a high school certificate rather than a regular high school diploma. The state proficiency test was administered by local school systems during the late winter 1983 to all freshman and any seniors, sophomores, and juniors who needed to retake portions of the test. In the November 1982 testing, a total of 6,532 high school seniors had to retake one or more sections of the test to meet the graduation requirements. This number represents 12.2% of the 1982-83 senior class based on the first month's fall enrollment of 53,725 seniors.[5] Since the tests are administered at the building level it was determined that high school principals should be surveyed to assess attitudes toward selected issues affecting proficiency testing in Tennessee.

Statement of the Problem

This study involved an assessment of the attitudes of high school principals regarding the Tennessee Proficiency Test. The study will focus on policies, programs and remediation concerning the implementation of the test.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it involves the attitudes of public high school principals regarding a matter of contemporary educational concern. High school principals are vested with the responsibility to direct the administering of the Tennessee Proficiency Test.

Tennessee State Department of Education test score data for 1982-83 presented in Table 1 show the subject areas and mean percentage scores from the 1982-83 test data. The table indicates the mean percentage score for items answered correctly on the test. The table shows that the scores were 86.2 for spelling, 82.4 for reading, 80.4 for mathematics, and 79.0 for language.[6]

Table 2 shows the percentage of students passing each of the subject area subtests. The highest percentage of those passing was 85% for spelling, mathematics 82%, reading 79%, language 71%, and the total for all subjects was 61%.[7] This indicates that 39% of the students overall failed one or more of the subtests. Since this represents a relatively high percentage of those taking the Tennessee Proficiency Test it was decided that this matter should be further investigated. The information from this study will be helpful in better understanding proficiency testing and offer assistance in providing a viable testing climate and appropriate remediation for those not passing such tests.

Table 1

Statewide Mean Percentage Scores On The
Tennessee Proficiency Test for 1982-83

Subject Area	Mean Percentage Score
Mathematics	80.0
Spelling	86.2
Language	79.0
Reading	82.4

Table 2

Percent of Ninth-Grade Students Passing the
Tennessee Proficiency Test for 1982-83

Subject Area	Percent Passing
Mathematics	82
Spelling	85
Language	71
Reading	79
All Subjects	61

Research Procedures

A questionnaire was developed to determine high school principals' attitudes toward proficiency testing issues in Tennessee. The questionnaires were distributed to a statewide sample of 147 public high school principals. Each school system with a high school was included in the total population. Eighty-two percent (121) of the principals responded.

Questionnaire items dealt with issues such as policy statements, remedial activities, graduation requirements and quality of education. The "Statistical Package for the Social Sciences" was used in the analysis of the data.

Presentation of the Data

An item by item presentation of the data follows:

Questionnaire Item 1. Does your school system have a written school board policy regarding proficiency testing?

	Number Responding	Percent	C.S.
Yes	47	39	6.02
No	74	61	Sig. (.05)

Many of Tennessee's public school systems (61% of those responding) do not have local board policy regarding proficiency testing. The local systems apparently maintain the minimum proficiency levels established by state mandate rather than adopt more stringent requirements.

Questionnaire Item 2. Do you provide a structured remedial instruction program for students not passing a part (or all parts) of the proficiency test?

Yes	81	67	13.90
No	40	33	Sig. (.05)

Two-thirds of those reporting indicated that a formal remediation program was in place to provide assistance to students failing to successfully pass the proficiency test. It was reported that thirty-three percent of those failing one or all parts of the proficiency test did not receive remedial instruction.

Questionnaire Item 3. Identify the types of structured remediation activity available in your school.

The principals in the study reported the following remedial activities:

Number Responding	Percent	Type of Activity
81	100	Help by regular classroom teacher.
81	100	Parential notification
67	83	Use of programmed materials
62	76	Help from resource teachers
61	75	Courses in basic mathematics, English and reading
53	65	Tutors including teachers, administrators and students
47	58	Extra assignments
41	51	Teacher aides
28	35	Special counseling
26	32	Computer assisted instruction
26	32	Extended school day
24	30	Volunteers to teach special classes
8	9	Free summer schools
7	8	Special help from other students

Questionnaire Item 4. The Tennessee Proficiency Test includes mathematics and language arts. Check any of the following which should be added to the Tennessee Proficiency Test.

Number Responding	Percent	Subject
27	33	Science
34	42	Social Studies
0	0	Art
0	0	Music
11	14	Health
		Other (Please List)
1		No more please!
1		History of Tennessee
1		Consumer Economics
1		Test should measure minimum success as compared to Goals of Educators. RR and MS, 0520-1-1-02.

Approximately one-third of the Tennessee principals who participated in the study believe that science and social studies should be included in the test. None of the principals intrepreted art and music among the "basic skills."

Questionnaire Item 5. Will the teaching of those subjects not covered in the Tennessee Proficiency Test diminish (receive less emphasis)?

	Number Responding	Percent	C.S.
Yes	42	35	11.32
No	79	65	Sig. (.05)

A majority of the principals did not think that the subjects not covered in the test would suffer for lack of teaching or receive less emphasis as compared to those subjects included in the test.

Questionnaire Item 6. What type(s) of certificate/diploma should be conferred for those students who do not pass the Tennessee Proficiency Test, including Special Education students?

Number Responding	Percent	Type Certificate/Diploma
79	65	Certificate of Attendance
29	24	Special Education Diploma*
1		Certificate of Completion
6	5	Uncertain

*For verified Special Education Students

A substantial number of principals thought that a certificate of attendance should be awarded to those students who do not pass the proficiency test by the end of the twelfth grade. Special education may present additional considerations.

The rules and regulations of the State Board of Education declare:

> "If a student who has been certified by an M-Team desires a high school diploma, the student must satisfy the requirements of the test. Any student, however, who is certified as a special education student at the beginning of the school year, who has successfully completed the individualized educational program, and for whom, in the judgment of the M-Team, the test would be an unreasonable burden for reason of the pupil's psychological or mental disability, will be awarded a special education diploma noting his or her specific accomplishments at the end of the 12th grade whether or not the student so certified has earned 18 credits."[8]

Questionnaire Item 7. Should the difficulty level of the Tennessee Proficiency Test be increased?

	Number Responding	Percent	C.S.
Yes	44	36	9.00
No	77	64	Sig. (.05)

Approximately two-thirds (64%) thought that the difficulty level of the Test should not be increased.

Questionnaire Item 8. Will the Tennessee Proficiency Test improve the quality of education in Tennessee?

	Number Responding	Percent	C.S.
Yes	70	58	2.98
No	51	42	N.S. (.05)

A majority of the principals who responded to the questionnaire were of the opinion that the proficiency test would contribute to an improvement in the quality of education in Tennessee.

Questionnaire Item 9. Will the Tennessee Proficiency Test insure that all students learn the basic skills they need?

	Number Responding	Percent	C.S.
Yes	24	20	44.04
No	97	80	Sig. (.05)

Most principals thought that it should not be assumed that all students would learn the basic skills needed even if they passed the test.

Summary

Proficiency testing in Tennessee is a reality. It is important that public schools provide assistance which will enable students to pass the Tennessee Proficiency Test. A summary of the findings includes the following: most school systems do not have written school board policies regarding proficiency testing; most schools have remedial instruction such as regular classroom teachers, parential involvement, programmed materials, computer assisted instruction, resource teachers, tutors, extra assignments and extended school days; most principals believed that proficiency testing will improve the quality of education; instruction in subject areas not covered in test should not diminish; a certificate of attendance is recommended for those not passing the Proficiency Test; and passage of the Test does not necessairly indicate the student has "basic skills" needed.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Tennessee Code Annotated, Volume 9, 1982 Supplement, 49-117, p. 6.

[2]State Board of Education, Rules, Regulations, and Minimum Standards for the Governance of Public Schools in the State of Tennessee. 0520-1-3-06. Nashville: State of Tennessee, 1982, pp. 50-51.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]"Local Systems to Administer State Proficiency Testing;" The Herald Gazette; Trenton, Tennessee; January 20, 1983, p. 5B.

[6]Tennessee State Department of Education. "Summary of 1982 Test Data by Local School Districts, Tennessee Proficiency Test," Form 2, Ninth Grade Students, 1982.

[7]Ibid.

[8]State Board of Education, op. cit., p. 51.